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NATIONAL DEFENSE UNIVERSITY

NATIONAL WAR COLLEGE

THE STRATEGIC VISION OF EDUARD SHEVARDNADZE

CORE COURSE (5601) ESSAY

LEONARD BELGARD CLASS OF 1997

COURSE 5601

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Report Documentation Page				Form Approved OMB No. 0704-0188	
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1. REPORT DATE 1997		2. REPORT TYPE		3. DATES COVERED 00-00-1997 to 00-00-1997	
4. TITLE AND SUBTITLE The Startegic Vision of Eduard Shevardnadze				5a. CONTRACT NUMBER	
				5b. GRANT NUMBER	
				5c. PROGRAM ELEMENT NUMBER	
6. AUTHOR(S)				5d. PROJECT NUMBER	
				5e. TASK NUMBER	
				5f. WORK UNIT NUMBER	
7. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES) National War College, 300 5th Avenue, Fort Lesley J. McNair, Washington, DC, 20319-6000				8. PERFORMING ORGANIZATION REPORT NUMBER	
9. SPONSORING/MONITORING AGENCY NAME(S) AND ADDRESS(ES)				10. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S ACRONYM(S)	
				11. SPONSOR/MONITOR'S REPORT NUMBER(S)	
12. DISTRIBUTION/AVAILABILITY STATEMENT Approved for public release; distribution unlimited					
13. SUPPLEMENTARY NOTES					
14. ABSTRACT see report					
15. SUBJECT TERMS					
16. SECURITY CLASSIFICATION OF:			17. LIMITATION OF ABSTRACT	18. NUMBER OF PAGES 10	19a. NAME OF RESPONSIBLE PERSON
a. REPORT unclassified	b. ABSTRACT unclassified	c. THIS PAGE unclassified			

By the mid-1980's, there was broad agreement among the leadership of the Soviet Union that the country was facing a deepening crisis at home and abroad. Its living standards were steadily falling, its industrial base crumbling, its citizens were increasingly demoralized and cynical, and its once vaunted technology lagged progressively farther behind that of its European and Asian neighbors, not to mention its principal adversary, the United States. The decline in these elements of "latent" national power was matched by the increasing irrelevance and economic burden of its massive "mobilized" power, as its ground and air forces were humiliated in Afghanistan by a mix of high and low-technology weapons, and its fleets became less able to match the state-of-the-art U.S. naval forces that dominated the seas beyond their inshore bastions.

All agreed that the ailing superpower needed a dose of strong medicine. While many conservatives called for a return to the "iron fist" that had served them well in simpler times, the rise of Mikhail Gorbachev to the position of General Secretary of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union (CPSU) in March 1985 turned the country onto a radically different course. He embarked on an effort to save the Soviet Union through a process of profound internal reform, involving "new thinking," open exchange of information ("glasnost"), and economic and political restructuring ("perestroika"). Recognizing that a much less hostile external environment was required for the success of his program, he set out to transform his country's foreign policy as well. Foreign policy reform was to be the cushion and shield behind which the system could be

rejuvenated¹ To assist with the latter effort, in July 1985 he named Eduard Shevardnadze to serve as Soviet Foreign Minister

A long-time friend who shared Gorbachev's own penchant for reform, Shevardnadze came to the job nearly devoid of foreign affairs experience but intellectually and emotionally driven by the need to change the basis of Soviet strategic thinking² This paper briefly describes and analyzes Shevardnadze's view of national security strategy as well as the salient aspects of the statecraft he employed to implement it It also addresses the question of whether national interests were somehow forwarded by his revolutionary approach, notwithstanding the fact that the strategic retreat over which he presided turned into a rout of catastrophic proportion.

There is debate among his former colleagues as to whether Shevardnadze did in fact think in systematic strategic terms rather than moving intuitively along the course that seemed best to support internal reform³ Both his critics and admirers have stated that he did not have a well thought-out view of Soviet interests and objectives, hence the sharp criticism in the Soviet parliament for what many regarded as pointless or even treasonable concessions to the West Secretary of State Baker, who developed a close personal relationship with him, wrote that Shevardnadze (and Gorbachev as well) appeared not to have thought through the consequences of his decisions⁴

¹ Carolyn M Ekedahl and Melvin A Goodman The Wars of Eduard Shevardnadze (State College PA Penn State University Press forthcoming 1996), Chapter 3 p 3

² Eduard Shevardnadze The Future Belongs to Freedom (New York The Free Press 1991) 50 Ekedahl and Goodman Chapter 3 p 14

⁴ James A Baker The Politics of Diplomacy (New York G P Putnam's Sons 1995) 146

The foregoing criticisms notwithstanding, it is clear that Shevardnadze did have a strategic vision that diverged significantly from traditional Soviet thinking regarding the key aspects of national security strategy and policy. These included basic assumptions about the nation and the world, the nature of national interests and the threats thereto, the setting of foreign policy objectives, the significance and value of available resources, and the means of policy execution.⁵ The various elements of his strategic approach are to be found in several published speeches, the book he wrote following his resignation as foreign minister, and discussions with foreign counterparts.

A NEW VIEW OF HOW THE WORLD WORKS

Shevardnadze notes in his book that he had spent most of his career as a party official in his native Georgia and had early on begun to favor a pragmatic approach over the ideological baggage that went with the job.⁶ He had been steeped in the traditional view that world events were determined by the class struggle and that the Soviet Union was faced with an implacable capitalist foe. The theme of confrontation dominated even such areas of apparently universal human concern as the control of arms and protection of the environment. The "image of the enemy," he later observed, was always held in front of the Soviet people.⁷

⁵ This analytical approach is based on Terry L. Deibel, "A Design For Grand Strategy," National War College Lecture Outline, 1995.

⁶ Shevardnadze, 26.

⁷ Ibid., 48.

His intellectual evolution while a party official was first evidenced by his tolerance of non-conformist artists and his exchanges of reform oriented views with his geographic neighbor in the Stavropol' party apparatus, Mikhail Gorbachev.⁸ He ultimately came to view the external situation in terms of the "profound structural and qualitative shifts in human civilization, the result of the growing role of science and technology and the increasing political, economic, social, and informational interdependence of the world."⁹ In his view, universal human values were becoming the natural priority across the world.¹⁰ In place of the "peaceful coexistence" that had reigned among nuclear-armed potential adversaries, he claimed to see a growing level of international cooperation, unencumbered by ideology, directed toward solving the problems that face humanity as a whole. A self-proclaimed idealist, he saw in this transformation "enormous potential for preserving and rebuilding the world while eliminating any differences, whether of class, nationality or religion."¹¹ He saw a growing tolerance by which "mankind is moving toward a unity of diversities and toward a community of equals who freely choose their own path."¹² What emerges is a vision of a world, capable of cooperation and positive collective action, that is far different from the historically-mandated dialectic that his predecessors saw behind all world events. This radical departure in world-view evoked scathing criticism from conservative CPSU ideologist Yegor Ligachev.¹³

⁸ Ibid., 26

⁹ Ibid., 26

¹⁰ Ibid., 61

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Eduard Shevardnadze. Speech presented at July 1988 conference of the Foreign Ministry of the USSR (Washington DC: FBIS transl. 12 Aug 88).¹³

¹³ Ekedahl and Goodman. Chapter 3, p. 232

With regard to what constitutes national power in the modern world. Shevardnadze emphasized the roles of science, technology, information access, and innovative thought. These elements were the necessary foundation for qualitatively superior military forces. He clearly had in mind the dangers of imperial overreach,¹⁴ though he never used the phrase, in his criticism of maintaining vast quantities of arms and keeping forces abroad to the detriment of the basic elements of national power.

Shevardnadze's statements regarding his "new thinking" were so effusive that one might ask whether he was not cynically using all of his dramatic talents to assuage the doubts of a hostile U.S. administration in order to realize the Gorbachev foreign policy agenda. Undoubtedly, he placed a high priority on convincing western counterparts that Soviet foreign policy was now based on a radically different view of the world. On balance, however, the totality of Shevardnadze's statements as well as comments about him by James Baker¹⁵ indicate that he sincerely believed what he was saying.

NATIONAL SECURITY INTERESTS AND THREATS

Shevardnadze's views on the international environment and the basis of national power yielded revised conclusions about Soviet national security interests and the threats thereto. His statements contain references to three major national interests: the importance of physical security, economic well-being, and value projection. While

¹⁴ Paul Kennedy, The Rise and Fall of the Great Powers (Glasgow: William Collins & Co., 1988).

¹⁵ Baker, 248.

placing physical security at the top of his list,¹⁶ he criticized the traditional military notions of defense of the country from external military threat by strictly military means.¹⁷ He consistently downplayed the existence of a near-term military threat. Rather, he emphasized the danger to the country's survival posed by its general inability to keep pace with the modern world. In line with his stated view that the world is now heavily interlinked, he appeared to add a fourth basic national interest - the survival of mankind as a whole - but it too was portrayed in mainly economic terms.

“At the present stage, of crucial significance is the ability, on the basis of advanced science, efficient production, and technology, to increase rapidly the material goods and justly distribute them and, by joint efforts, to restore and protect the resources essential to the survival of mankind.”¹⁸

The result of this shift in prioritizing national interests, particularly in the light of the above-noted need to create a protective cushion for domestic reform, was the implicit addition of a separate vital interest - the maintenance of a stable and cooperative international environment to allow reforms to succeed.

Shevardnadze weakly embraced the need to project national values overseas, couching it in terms of providing a viable example of democratic socialism that others might emulate.¹⁹ This approach marginalized value projection as a national interest, a far cry from when it was not only a vital interest but a historical duty.

FOREIGN POLICY OBJECTIVES

¹⁶ Eduard Shevardnadze, 23 Oct 89 speech to plenary session of the USSR Supreme Soviet (Washington DC FBIS translation 24 Oct 89).

¹⁷ Shevardnadze, The Future Belongs to Freedom, 55.

¹⁸ Shevardnadze July 1988 speech, 10.

¹⁹ Ibid.

In accordance with his revised set of national interests, Shevardnadze set out a variety of new foreign policy objectives. The most crucial was to convince the West that the Soviet Union was genuinely interested in cooperation and the lessening of tensions. Second was the goal of reaching significant arms control agreements in order to reallocate resources to economic reform. A related third objective was disengagement from costly foreign military involvements. Fourth was the goal of preventing the West from exploiting this strategic retreat to the detriment of the Soviet regime. Fifth was the fostering of economic and technical cooperation that would assist in rehabilitating the ailing economy. All of these objectives were required to undo the harm to the Soviet Union caused by decades of relative isolation and hostility.

POLICY CHOICES

To achieve his objectives, Shevardnadze initiated an unprecedented policy of outreach to former adversaries. He built confidence through cultivating warm personal relationships, especially with Secretaries of State Schultz and Baker. He brought about the opening of secret Soviet defense facilities to arms control inspections. He admitted the folly of the invasions of Afghanistan and Czechoslovakia, criticized the deployment of SS-20 missiles and the continued production of chemical weapons despite the 1969 U.S. halt, and proclaimed a policy of non-intervention in the affairs of socialist countries. He worked to "demilitarize" the national security process and helped push through the defense doctrine of "reasonable sufficiency." Under his stewardship, arms control

agreements were achieved on nuclear, conventional, and chemical weapons.²⁰ He helped lay the groundwork for the 1985 Geneva summit and subsequent high-level meetings that defused the tensions that had developed in the early 1980's. Soviet troops pulled out of Afghanistan and the draw-down from Central Europe began.

USE OF AVAILABLE RESOURCES

In carrying out the above policies, Shevardnadze employed several available resources. His greatest asset was the ability to modify policies that disturbed and taxed his western counterparts. He was able to offer withdrawal from Afghanistan, removal of the threat of force against renegade allies, and broad concessions on arms control. The seriousness with which he and Gorbachev viewed the domestic crisis was manifested in the extent to which they believed they needed to retrench abroad. It is likely that both felt that the resulting costs would not include the utter collapse of the Soviet Union. It has been argued persuasively that the West pocketed these concessions and gave very little in return.²¹ Further, the type of concessions involved were certain to draw the ire of the security and military establishments as well as conservative CPSU apparatchiks. Gorbachev finally moved to the right under pressure from the latter elements. Shevardnadze stood by his principles and resigned in 1990 amidst cries of "treason,"

²⁰ Ekedahl and Goodman, Chapter 3, p. 25.

²¹ *Ibid.* Introduction, p. 13.

undefended by his former boss whose political fortunes collapsed along with the empire he had tried to save

CONCLUSION

Is there any kernel of victory that can be seen in this clear defeat? Shevardnadze carried out his policies well but both he and Gorbachev overestimated their ability to shape events with remaining resources. They might have used the available concessions in a more demanding manner but in doing so the already skeptical West might have seen them as more of the same old gang. Hence the international atmosphere would not have changed enough to provide the needed breathing space. Could they or a replacement group have restored the iron fist? By all indications (including the failed 1991 coup), most of the security establishment had lost the will to defend the rotting system by using force or terror against the population. Thus the illness affecting the Soviet Union seems to have been too far advanced for any approach to have saved it. What Shevardnadze and Gorbachev did for their respective new countries (Georgia and Russia) and for the rest of the world as well was to help set the stage for a surprisingly peaceful revolution in world affairs. Shevardnadze thus may have been successful in a way that had more lasting value for mankind.